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ABSTRACT

Portland State University in Oregon has developed a program to train teachers of the visually handicapped in rural settings which emphasizes: (1) close working relationships with parents and community based programs; (2) strong advocacy training for visually impaired and blind learners; (3) excellent outreach and consultive skills to regular classroom teachers, teacher aides and others; (4) ongoing inservice training with parents, teachers and others from allied disciplines; (5) effective community communication; (6) personal and career development counseling. Existing personnel shortages in remote rural areas led to modification of the existing special education teacher preparation program to include a requirement of 8 hours of weekly contact time with a visually handicapped student and an associated seminar; restructuring the class on communicating with parents and paraprofessionals to stress organizing effective parent support groups; modification of the class, "Implications of Vision Problems," and infusion of microcomputer applications in the class, "Clinical Practicum I." Better preparation for providing outreach and consultive services should occur through greater emphasis on child advocacy, student teaching in a rural district, and inservice training of paraprofessionals, teacher aides, and volunteers. (DB)

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Breaking the Traditional Model: A Preservice Preparation Program to Serve Rural Visually Handicapped Learners

Introduction

Throughout the United States there exists a serious and alarming shortage of trained teachers to work with visually impaired and blind children. Nowhere is this shortage being felt more acutely than in rural areas of the nation. Many factors are responsible for the recruitment and retention problems that administrators face in hiring these teachers, and it is the intent of this project at Portland State University to respond to this need in outlying school districts in Oregon and Washington.

As a result of the teacher shortage, documented by field input and statistical studies, we find many visually impaired children either without any direct services, or inappropriately placed and inadequately served. As sensory input is the most critical factor for continued progress in an educational setting, and since vision accounts for approximately 80% of that sensory input, visually impaired children are at a significant disadvantage without any direct services.

The focus of this project, then, is to respond to that shortage of adequately trained teachers of the visually handicapped in the Northwest by specifically preparing teachers to serve visually impaired and blind learners in rural settings. Breaking the traditional "teacher training" model, Portland State University is revamping its approach by providing not only training of an academic nature but by emphasizing the following:

1. Close working relationships with parents and community based programs - i.e. total program planning.
2. Strong advocacy training for visually impaired and blind learners.
3. Excellent outreach and consultive skills to regular classroom teachers, teacher aides and others.
4. Ongoing inservice training with parents, teachers and others from allied disciplines.

EC 211 006

5. Effective communications throughout the community with those who have a vested interest in the welfare of a local visually handicapped student.

6. Personal and career development counseling to students, which will assist in long term commitment to the profession.

To achieve the goals of this project, graduate students are selected from rural communities on the basis of previous academic background and recommendations regarding their teaching qualifications and the likelihood that they will return and remain in the area. Once selected, students are offered a full scholarship for the three terms of study required for the completion of the Basic Certificate. To further accomplish the objectives of this project, Portland State University will:

1. Train teachers of visually handicapped learners in a program geared toward the unique needs of those living in rural areas.
2. Select trainees who are likely to return to these areas, thereby eliminating or reducing the problems of teacher recruitment and retention faced by many school administrators.
3. Select and develop practica sites which best exemplify a rural environment necessary for a quality university program.
4. Place increasing emphasis on the importance of home, school, and community collaboration in training teachers to work most effectively with visually impaired and blind children.
5. Develop a closer working relationship between rural school districts/regional vision programs and Portland State University, thereby meeting the need of professional growth opportunities requested by rural vision teachers.

Statement of Need

There exists today a serious nationwide shortage of adequately trained teachers of visually handicapped students, especially in rural areas (Parsons, 1986; Johnson, 1986). This shortage is being acutely felt in the rural school districts of Oregon and Washington (Stolle, 1986). According to Helge (1981), the percentage of rural school age children not enrolled in any program represents a nonenrollment rate of at least twice that of urban areas. Simply stated, the congressional mandates for equity of services for the handicapped population are clearly not being met in many rural areas.

Berthold Lowenfeld states that blindness "imposes three basic limitations on an individual:

(1) in the range and variety of experiences,
(2) in the ability to get about, and
(3) in the control of the environment and the self in relation to it". (Lowenfeld, 1975)

Given these three basic tenets, the way a visually handicapped student behaves and learns is dependent upon variable factors which include etiology of visual loss, amount of remaining vision, additional handicapping conditions, age of onset and personality of the student.

This sensory impairment requires a set of viable options to promote alternatives within the environment leading to success within the school and community.

For blind and visually impaired school aged children, lack of vision affects several curricular areas where intervention is required to insure concept and academic development leading to vocational success in adulthood. These would include:

(1) early childhood intervention to insure appropriate progress through sensory-motor and preconceptual stages of life
(2) materials and methodological adaptation during preoperational stages of life to include appropriate language development, using signs and symbols to establish basic environmental concepts of body imagery, spatial relationships, directionality, etc.
(3) the concrete and formal operative periods which occur during the academic years and involve a myriad of skills which need to be addressed to allow for normal progression:

a. Braille and nemeth code
b. Abacus
c. Activities of daily living
d. Orientation and mobility
e. Visually training
f. Vocational transition
g. Adapted material and methodology which parallels etiology of visual loss

Even the best of classroom teachers would have difficulty providing all that the visually handicapped child needs. As Spungin (Competency Based Curriculum for Teachers of the Visually Impaired: A National Study, 1977) points out so well, teachers need not only technical skills (i.e. braille, abacus, slate and stylus) but also skills to teach concepts that most children acquire through the use of vision, assessment skills, counseling skills, supervisory skills, and program construction skills.

PL 94-142 mandates a commitment to provide appropriate educational programming in the least restrictive environment. Both Oregon and Washington have accepted this mandate and are working to insure that every child, to the greatest extent possible, is educated with his nonhandicapped peers. However, despite the commitment, personnel shortages do exist for the following reasons:

A. <u>Difficulty in recruitment and retention of vision teachers due to geographic and climate barriers</u>. Many teachers, especially new graduates, find urban districts more appealing due to higher salaries, a wider variety of recreational and social opportunities, and greater access to professional growth possibilities (Johnson, 1986). In addition, severe weather conditions in the mountainous regions of Oregon and Washington negatively impact teacher-student contact time, continuity of services, and staff morale.

B. Population sparsity and the greater likelihood of professional isolation on the job. A number of studies have linked teacher retention rates to this isolating phenomenon (Bina, 1981; Adams, 1975). Furthermore, Bower (1976) found that teachers from rural school districts tended to demonstrate lower morale and a higher potential for attrition than corresponding teachers from larger school districts.

C. Sheer distances travelled. Itinerant vision teachers are responsible for serving students who often live extremely far from the school district's regional program office. For example, Oregon teachers commonly drive 100-150 miles one way (2-3 hours) to serve students in rural Harney County (Southeastern Oregon). The Eastern Oregon Regional Program for the Visually Handicapped currently serves 50 students who are scattered within a 28,000 square mile area!

D. Economic conditions. Unemployment rates in Central and Eastern Washington and Oregon continue to rank significantly above the national average (10-14%). Since vision programs are considered to be of high cost and low enrollment, funding for staff development and the addition of teaching faculty tends to receive a lower priority than that of funding for higher incidence programs (i.e. learning disabilities, speech impairments, etc.). Furthermore, there exists an inadequate regional funding formula for these low incidence students. Continued high unemployment has further eroded school tax bases and the state legislatures have been unwilling/unable to maintain necessary levels of support.

E. Proximity to teacher training institutions. Generally, residents of rural areas are unable to leave their families and travel to university training programs for an extended time. In addition, the relatively few university training programs (in the area of the visually handicapped) which do exist have experienced significant cutbacks in student financial support and outreach programs to rural areas and have directly been affected adversely.

The following statistics show the present service delivery within the two states:

	Washington	Oregon
legally blind students identified	904	570
# of trained teachers	16	41
student/teacher ratio	56:1	14:1
anticipated # of children	869 - 1,459	700 - 1,290

(Summary of Data on Handicapped Children and Youth, 1985)

These state reported statistics clearly show that there are large numbers of children who are not identified within the states or who are being underserved due to a lack of qualified personnel.

Response

Portland State University under a 3 year grant from the USOE has begun a series of curriculum adaptations to specifically prepare teachers to work in rural areas of the Northwest.

For the past 25 years, Portland State University has carried on a fairly traditional teacher preparation program on a graduate level involving core course working culminating in a student teaching experience. Through a needs assessment study begun in 1981 (Maron) it was determined that the university was not meeting the professional preparation needs especially in the rural areas. From this needs assessment, four major objectives were identified as necessary for all special education teachers: skill in diagnosis, planning, implementation and evaluation. Beyond these, additional needs were determined for those working in remote areas of the states. These included: strong advocacy training; excellent outreach and consultative skills; ongoing inservice training with parents, teachers and allied professionals, development of community based programs and effective communication skills to serve cross cultural populations in rural areas. Additionally, the ability to provide a self identity and continued personal professional growth while isolated has been determined to be of great significance in the retention of teachers in rural areas. (Fowler, 1981)

In order to prepare teachers of the visually handicapped, it quickly became apparent that modifications in the existing program would need to be made.

1. Development of a new course entitled <u>Directed Field Practicum (and Seminar)</u>. Eight hours of contact time/week at school/home of a visually handicapped student will be required. In addition to working with a visually handicapped student in school, the trainee will also spend time as a citizen advocate for this person. This relationship may include participation in community recreation programs, helping access public transportation, providing respite care for parents, etc. Modeled after the program developed by Trunbull (1977), there exists some compelling evidence that this approach is a powerful training tool whereby prospective teachers get firsthand experiences with the direct and indirect influences of blindness on family dynamics.

Taken in the first term of the program, this practicum and seminar experience will give trainees an added dimension and more comprehensive exposure to the everyday realities of coping with blindness which is often not encountered during on-campus coursework. As a rule, rural itinerant vision teachers are called upon to work closely with parents, and their support of the school program is essential. This course will also help serve as an important screening device for evaluating teacher performance early in the program.

Additionally, this class will focus on working with professionals from allied disciplines, communication facilitation, and total program planning. Also, developing inservice training skills will be covered in conjunction with the class <u>Communicating with Parents and Paraprofessionals</u>. The inservice training models proposed by McGuigan

(1981) and Rubin (1978) will be explored. Essentially, inservice training is based on the factors of (1) defining specifically the training to be done, (2) identifying formal and informal authority figures, (3) identifying organizational components, (4) developing a quantifiable evaluation plan, (5) identifying multicultural events, and (6) budget analysis. These models appear to be ones that have particular value for itinerant teachers as a framework on which to add the unique opportunities or constraints imposed by a rural setting. The emphases of these models of inservice training lie in targeting specific behaviors for specific populations in measurable terms. Complimenting this program, the Careers inservice multimedia approach of the American Foundation for the Blind will be utilized.

2. Restructuring the class Communicating with Parents and Paraprofessionals. In addition to content on parent education programs, there will be infusion of two exemplary programs of organizing parent support groups which appear most applicable for rural areas. These include:

A. Parents as Partners in Support of Student Achievement (Sheldon, 1986) This program is based on three concepts: parent as teacher, parent as motivator of student learning, and building strong bonds of parent-teacher cooperation. The program is a three part series, the goals of which are: to identify the importance of the role of parents in student achievement, to teach parents how to assess their home as a learning environment for children and how to implement that knowledge, to help parents understand the characteristics of their child as a learner at different ages and stages, to help parents understand the correlation between positive self-esteem and student achievement and the parent's role in building their child's self-concept, to establish a partnership with parents on discipline and behavior expectations for home and school, and to teach parents how to use parent/teacher conferences as a way to establish open, clear, purposeful communication between school, parents, and children. It is a well organized, easy to follow program that could be readily implemented in rural settings by teachers, and

B. Parents as Effective Teachers of Visually Impaired Children (Robinson, 1984) Developed as a longitudinal study by the National Association of Parents of the Visually Impaired, it is an excellent resource for prospective teachers to learn about initiating parent support groups; implementing and maintaining them with close cooperation from the vision specialist.

3. Modification of Implications of Vision Problems class to include:

A. Greater emphasis on conducting vision screening programs to determine eligibility for special services from the itinerant vision teacher. National Association for the Prevention of Blindness guidelines will be utilized. Rural vision teachers are increasingly being called upon to perform these screening procedures, far more than teachers in urban settings. Emphasis will be placed on utilization of screening instruments and procedures that are cost-effective and could be readily accessed in the region.

B. Helping parents access community-based service groups and other resources which may provide financial and transportation aid in order to receive medical/optometric care, necessitating lost work time and high costs. Particularly helpful would be developing a network of services through the database at Low Vision Information Center in Portland, Oregon and Washington State Commissions for the Blind, local medical/optometric societies, etc.

C. Greater emphasis on securing low vision aids and appliances. We are currently working on developing a closer working relationship with Pacific University College of Optometry and anticipate staff from there to teach part of this class.

4. Infusion of microcomputer applications in Clinical Practicum I. Working in rural areas can be most isolating with little chance for professional growth opportunities. Access to the school district's microcomputer database can provide the itinerant teacher with many opportunities. For example, access to the ERIC system and Special Net provide opportunities for utilizing the latest research on curriculum development, program development, etc., important conferences acquisition of media and materials, etc. -- a vital service in rural areas! Microcomputer infusion is a very prominent part of this project. It represents a very exciting possibility for teachers in rural areas to develop networking skills for improved communication and services to visually handicapped students as well as to themselves professionally.

Additionally, to prepare teachers so they can provide outreach and consultive services to schools and community based programs, while acting as advocates for visually handicapped learners, the following modifications were made:

A. Greater emphasis on knowledge and implementation of the basic principles of PL 94-142, especially as they apply to advocacy issues as well as training in outreach skills. We will

emphasize the critical importance of teachers as advocates by implementing the work of two pioneers in this field - Wolfensberger (1979) and Biklen (1979). Their views are based on the notion that good communication is at the heart of any advocacy effort. As such this approach corresponds with the goal of improved communication interaction for all those who impact on educational services for blind individuals. This approach focuses on developing skills of lobbying, initiating factfinding forums, stimulating community awareness, eliminating myths and stereotypes of blindness, etc. In addition the outreach model of service delivery developed by the Washington State School for the Blind (Maron, 1981) will be emphasized as one of a constellation of possible models to be implemented.

B. Modifying the focus of Student Teaching. Trainees will now do their student teaching in a rural school district, either in their home community or one similar to it. This experience will be very appropriate to the one in which they will be ultimately employed. One key requirement of this practicum is that trainees be strong advocates for visually handicapped learners as they interact with the regular class teacher and support personnel, as well as school administrators.

C. Infusion of skills in providing inservice training to paraprofessionals, teacher aides, and volunteers. Using the models discussed above (McGuigan, 1981; Rubin, 1978), this will enable itinerant teachers to broaden the impact of their teaching significantly, especially between visitations to the local school. It also has an additional potential effect of interesting more people in a professional career or working with the visually handicapped. Finally, such a program also helps to set a more positive tone about the capabilities of the visually handicapped as more and more people have the opportunity to interact with them. Numerous attitudinal studies have shown that children feel more positive about the capabilities of blind peers as their frequency of interaction increases.

Overall, this preservice training model views the role of rural vision teachers differently than the preparation required for those teaching in more urban areas. Both provide instruction to students, but the rural teacher must also be a strong coordinator of service from many diverse areas. These include:

1. Working closely with parents in a consultive capacity, as an organizer of parent support grouns, and providing inservice to parents on advocacy issues.

2. Accessing regional and local services which have historically provided resources (i.e. State Library for the Blind, volunteer braille groups, Lions Clubs, etc.) and those which are available to other students as well (child development specialist, school psychologist, community recreation program staff, etc.)

3. Organizing inservice training with regular classroom teachers, parents, etc., to maintain the effectiveness and progress of the mainstreaming efforts between regularly scheduled school visits.

4. Implementing basic principles of organizational development and political awareness such that building administrators and the vision specialist develop a close working relationship with mutually agreed upon objectives.

5. Developing a network not only with other vision teachers, but also with professionals from allied disciplines who also have a vested interest in the welfare of visually handicapped students.

A word must be said here regarding the practicum experiences, for the practicum becomes the real core of experience as the student progresses through the class work. The practica which is required during each term of the program serves needs beyond those previously listed. Through seminars and integration with the PSU classroom experience, it provides the opportunity to develop problem solving skills within the community in which they are located. Too, the student is required to maintain a daily journal, not only describing their concrete experiences, but must also contain personal reflections and feelings about themselves, their interpersonal relationships with staff and students, and self evaluations, leading to greater indepth understanding of themselves and the profession.

Summary

State and national statistics document an alarming shortage of trained teachers of the visually handicapped in the Pacific Northwest. In response to this need, Portland State University has significantly modified its existing teacher preparation model to address specific needs of professionals who will be employed in rural areas of Washington and Oregon.

As generic special education preparation is inappropriate for sensory impaired children, very specific coursework is integrated with core practica experiences which lead to competencies in work with rural communities. Using this approach, Portland State University will provide training in cross-cultural populations, effective communication skills, problem solving skills, creative programming skills, inservice training professionals, as well as providing personal growth and development impetus for the teaching professional.

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